



THE STATE
OF
WYOMING

ADDRESS TO THE
SIXTY-SECOND LEGISLATURE
AND THE PEOPLE OF
THE STATE OF WYOMING

JANUARY 8, 2013

Superintendent of Public Instruction
Cindy Hill

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Synopsis

Do we want an educational system that is unparalleled in the United States and abroad? If we want to become the best educational system in the Nation, we must (1) set a measurable goal and not change it for five to seven years, (2) commit to transparency of data and results, and (3) establish a cohesive system of instructional support. Starting with a historical perspective of education in Wyoming, I lay out the fundamentals for achieving our educational goals.

INTRODUCTION

During the past forty years, Wyoming lost its focus on instruction. In the mid-1970's, as a result of the lure of federal funds and programs, the Wyoming Department of Education ("Department") converted personnel from instructional experts into program managers focused on reporting on the use of federal money. Over time, the Department became a compliance-oriented organization. The focus on instruction dimmed.

More recently, since the Wyoming Supreme Court's equity mandate in the mid-1990s, our collective attention was focused on building new schools and paying for the apparatus of education rather than on the instructional work of schools. In response to the Court's equity mandate, education became about meeting the funding requirements of the mandate and administering that mandate. At the same time the equity mandate turned our attention away from what was happening in the classroom. "No Child Left Behind" and the related assessment movement further diverted focus away from learning. During the assessment movement, the attention in schools became about how to *measure* the progress of children rather than whether children were actually *learning*.

But a sea change is happening. The focus has shifted back to instruction. In everyday conversation, Wyoming people are engaged in discussions about how to improve the quality of instruction and how to protect instructional time with students. Our communities are coming together and focusing not on the

school building, but on what is happening *inside* the classroom. As a state, we know that the purpose of education is to educate the child, not only to build new buildings, or to come up with the best test, or to lead in administrator salaries. Instruction: a relentless focus on instruction is what leads to results, and those working at the ground level of education have always known this. This has been the emphasis of my administration from the outset deriving from my career-long focus on school improvement and instructional leadership. As I will show in the following pages, educational research confirms instruction is the proper focus.

As a result of the work across Wyoming and because of the focus on instruction, there is good news to be discussed about education in Wyoming. For the second year in a row, our state assessment shows increases in student performance statewide in all areas. One indicator of Wyoming's success is that 90.39 percent of Wyoming students are proficient in math in third grade according to our state assessment. For the last decade, Wyoming has performed above the national average scale score in reading and math, in grades tested by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Wyoming ranks eleventh in the nation on NAEP eighth grade science scores and twelfth on NAEP eighth grade reading scores. According to the 2012 CNBC survey, Wyoming ranks eleventh in the United States in education. Wyoming's commitment to education contributes to Wyoming's business rankings, including the Pollina Top 10 Pro-Business Rankings in which Wyoming is third in the country. These and other indicators tell the same story: Wyoming students are the beneficiaries of an increased focus on instruction. Of course, much more work needs to be done.

Despite this evidence of improvement, though with less frequency, we hear that Wyoming schools are failing and that teachers are to blame. We have become mired in this false narrative. The truth is that teachers and administrators are showing quantifiable progress and are working very hard to achieve results. But this fragile reality struggles to blossom under the cloud of blame from the political process, some in the press, and the education industry whose purpose is to sell services (consultants) and programs (vendors) benefitting from the perception that schools are failing.

What is the impact on the teacher who is working hard, who shows improved results, and yet, who is subjected to continued criticism for "failing" our children? The motivation to work hard and to improve quickly dissipates in this environment. Simply put, you cannot shame people into performing, and you certainly do not want to punish people who are showing significant strides in performance.

There is a role here for everyone in Wyoming, including the media. I would like to applaud the media, and especially local newspapers, for their efforts in covering the hard work happening in education in their hometown schools. I have seen the evidence of the commitment to community by press coverage featuring academic successes. The news media has the ability to help focus us on what is important: Instruction. Stories of outstanding teachers, students, parents, leaders, and communities, and how each is excelling, are important topics that should be covered.

It is time for Wyoming to start believing in itself again. Every day I see the evidence that teachers and administrators, our students, and parents, are capable of delivering the best educational system in the United States. We once were at the top in the Nation, and we could be again. As you will see in the discussion that follows, I believe in the kind of accountability that will work because I believe in educators. And that confidence is being confirmed. The renewal of education in Wyoming has begun.

THE ORIGINAL PURPOSE OF THE WYOMING DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION— COMING BACK TO OUR ROOTS

When Wyoming was an educational leader in the Nation, the Department reflected the focus on instruction. It was no coincidence that the Wyoming Constitution created a Superintendent of Public *Instruction*. From the time of statehood, the focus was on instruction and supporting that focus in the schools.

Over time, largely to obtain federal funding, the Department became compliance-oriented and the focus on instruction diminished. The results were predictable. Distractions from instruction and increased bureaucracy meant that results did not keep pace with those states that had set a clear focus on literacy and numeracy and had set targets.

The goal of my administration has been clear and has not wavered. At the center of every discussion and decision we make is the focus on increasing student achievement through improved instruction in literacy and numeracy. An educational agency concerned with things other than instruction and learning is not truly an educational agency.

Still, the shift from a predominantly compliance-oriented agency to an agency focused on instruction *and* compliance has been hard for those who helped build the compliance-based system and who believe that the federal

government knows better how to solve our problems. The difference in philosophy boils down to those who wish to cling to the compliance role that has not achieved the desired results and those who see that the Department must lead in supporting the purpose of our schools—reflecting a relentless commitment to instruction and results.

In the past, the Department had a robust teaching and learning focus with content specialists in virtually every area. Since the 1980s, however, the Department has lost its content specialization. Many, if not most, states have content specialists in every content area that provide statewide leadership and professional development for teachers and administrators and that are actively involved in educational organizations. The Wyoming Department of Education is an exception to this rule.

I have brought the Department's focus back to instruction and we are collaborating with school districts across the state in ways never before seen on professional development, instructional practices, and how to improve schools and student results. In the longer term, funding should be redirected (not increased) to build a permanent teaching, learning, and leadership division within the agency that is tasked with professional development for teachers and instructional leaders. The capability should exist within the agency to lead in these areas rather than always relying on expensive contractors and consultants who then depart, fully paid, often before success or failure is known

CHARACTERISTICS OF TOP PERFORMING SCHOOLS

Before discussing what must happen in Wyoming to improve educational outcomes, it is only logical to survey what makes high-performing schools in Wyoming, in the Nation, and overseas so successful. It is entirely predictable that high-performing schools share characteristics that explain why they consistently achieve results. These practices provide the roadmap to achieving performance in all Wyoming schools.

A laser-like focus on instruction is what produces results, and those working with students in classrooms every day have always known this. Derived from my career-long commitment on school improvement and instructional leadership, my experience has shown me that we must have a relentless and uncompromising focus on instruction. The educational research bears this out. Dr. John Hattie, Director of the Melbourne University Research Laboratory, an international researcher known for a synthesis of 800 studies related to student achievement, asserts that high-qualified, trained teachers, and the approach to teaching, are the pillars of student performance.

Wyoming's High Flyers

High-performing Wyoming schools share characteristics with the highest performers across the country and the world. In 2011, I invited representatives from some of Wyoming's top-performing schools to come together for one purpose: to share the practices that are achieving results in their schools so that we could see commonalities among the high performers.

Here are a few examples of what Wyoming's top performers do each day: they hold all students and stakeholders accountable for student learning and achievement, aiming for 100 percent proficiency on state assessments and are committed to authentic learning. They believe in sharing the data with the whole staff, making information about student performance personal and available to teachers, parents, and students. They focus on instruction, believing that schools must have a laser-like focus on teaching and learning. As a result of this focus, they recruit great teachers and support them in their work with students. Finally, their principals hold themselves accountable for student results and they examine student results in evaluating teachers.

Massachusetts

Recently, at my invitation, Dr. David Driscoll came to Wyoming, not as a paid consultant, but as a colleague, to describe how Massachusetts became the top education state in the country. Dr. Driscoll is the former Commissioner of Education for Massachusetts and served in that capacity during the period when Massachusetts grew to become number one in the country. According to Dr. Driscoll, here is how Massachusetts became number one: First, state and local leaders chose an accepted national measure and stuck with it. Massachusetts chose NAEP and have committed to using it for over twenty years. Second, everyone resolved that instruction is paramount and Massachusetts made sure that teachers are committed to be the best in the country at teaching. Third, Massachusetts held students accountable. Massachusetts tests students in the tenth grade, and students who do not pass the tenth grade test by the twelfth grade do not graduate.

International Success Stories

The success of the highest-performing countries is equally well-documented. Dr. Michael Fullan, a professor emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has led national education reform initiatives, including the country-wide strategy in England. He is a leading authority on why Finland, Singapore, and others are educational leaders in the world.

Dr. Fullan focuses on the drivers that lead to success or failure. “Drivers” are policy and strategy levers that have the best chance of achieving successful reform. The experience with education reform has led to the recognition of approaches that succeed, and those that typically fail. Dr. Fullan identifies eight characteristics of effective school districts:¹

(1) Instructional Focus: a clear direction and relentless focus on student achievement through instructional improvement in the classroom. A district must continuously strengthen its core by increasing teachers’ skills and knowledge, engaging students in learning, and ensuring the curriculum challenges students. Schools that have shown huge gains almost always cite literacy and improved relationships as their focus.

Comment: I assert that to seek excellence in Wyoming schools, all of us need to attend to teaching literacy and maximizing student learning time. Focus requires cohesion, not fragmentation. Fragmentation is a destructive tendency, and must be avoided. As with the current reform efforts in Wyoming, states and nations that have broken educational systems apart, assigning one critical function to one group, another critical function to a different group, and other components to other groups with no organizational connection between them and with no clear path of communication (yet each with their own bureaucracies that impose greater and often conflicting requirements on teachers and administrators) are destined to fail. Currently, over twenty distinct bodies are working on various aspects of accountability in Wyoming. Yet, it is often the case that the consultant for one body has not read or does not understand the recommendations of the consultant for another body on interrelated functions. All of this distracts from instructional focus.

(2) Data: access and use of data as a tool for developing and measuring strategies for classroom and school improvement and to monitor progress. Data also helps to shape targets for phased focuses of improvement. Data is the means of diagnosing student needs and addressing needs through specific instructional responses.

Comment: I believe the data must be immediately accessible to district educators, especially teachers. Further, this data must be based on the measures we hold steady and can trust. Transparency of results and practices are the key to inspiring

¹Michael Fullan, *All Systems Go: The Change Imperative for Whole System Reform* (Corwin, 2010), pg. 36.

²*Id.*

better performance. The Department's Assessment Resource Tool (ART) is an available tool that can provide teachers, administrators, and all stakeholders data that can leverage performance.

(3) Leadership: development of teacher, principal, and district leadership to share effective practices from each other and from the larger research base. Research is focused on teaching strategies that make a difference. Leaders must participate as learners in working with teachers to address instructional needs.

Comment: Instructional leaders first hold themselves accountable for student achievement.

(4) Resources: allocating resources in accordance with this focus without a reliance on one-time, special funding. Resources (human, financial, and time) should be clearly aligned to support the teaching and learning core of the district's work.

Comment: I believe that resources must be focused on instruction, on teaching and learning. Too often resources are diverted to pay higher administrator salaries or add additional non-instructional administration and staff. Too often resources go to pay vendors and consultants who are held to few, if any, consequences for student achievement; collecting their fees and then departing.

(5) Reduce Distractions: a concerted effort to reduce the distractions that undermine teachers' and principals' capacity to carry out their work. Excessive bureaucracy, inconsistent messages, multiple non-classroom initiatives, and time-and-energy-consuming activities distract from the focus on student achievement. To avoid initiative fatigue, effective districts drop distractions while focusing on quality instruction.

Comment: I believe that instructional time is seriously compromised when teachers are required to participate in efforts unrelated to student learning or instruction.

(6) Community: link to parents and the community and related agencies to provide support for students and educators and to intervene early in case of difficulties experienced by students and by schools.

Comment: The first teacher is the parent. Beyond that, communities who hold high expectations for student learning make achievement not only possible, but probable. The entire community must take responsibility for each child. I learned this from the high-flying districts that gave credit for their success, in part, to their communities. I believe that communities with support and high expectations are encouraged by the press—the radio carries success stories; the newspaper features excellence in teaching and learning, regardless of politics. Accountability measures cannot be allowed to displace community responsibility and commitment.

(7) Communication: a constant and consistent communication that focuses on the core message up and down and across the district. Everyone needs to know the central focus of teaching and learning priorities and how to achieve them. Research findings and effective practices need to be shared. Staying on message is crucial.

Comment: Communication is essential. We must always communicate commitment.

(8) Esprit de Corps: a sense of identity and sense of community among teachers and principals and between schools and the district. People take pride in their work and that of their colleagues and feel a strong sense of affinity with the district as a whole. Allegiances are strong, and collaborative competition leverages the schools to stronger and stronger performance.

Comment: Successful systems, Dr. Fullan observes, have come to trust and respect teachers. One might ask, as Dr. Fullan has, “if you don’t have trust, how do you get it?” To break the cycle of distrust, he says, you must first trust and lend assistance in areas where competencies lag. We cannot be at war with our teachers and school districts and expect better results. We must come together, trust, and unite in our goal of making Wyoming the best education state in the country.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY EFFORTS IN WYOMING

The national accountability movement gained momentum with “No Child Left Behind.” The experience with accountability legislation from the federal government has been mixed. “No Child Left Behind” was well intentioned, and had some success. This legislation focused the country on results and created the expectation that our schools are capable of delivering results.

But as much as it did for raising expectations, “No Child Left Behind” added massive bureaucratic requirements that led to the creation of functions committed not to the educational progress of children, but to whether the requirements of the legislation were being fulfilled. Further, many educators and legislators in Wyoming have found fault with “No Child Left Behind” on the basis that educational progress cannot be mandated from Washington.

I support accountability measures as long as they reflect Wyoming’s needs and as long as students receive a world-class education. The desire to know how we are doing is hardly new. Wyoming has always wanted to know how its schools are doing. Consider the one-room schools in the early Twentieth Century. Back then, students took an eighth grade county test to verify that their teachers had taught what the community deemed important. Today, we need an accountability system that provides school performance information to local school boards and communities, one that helps communities understand the progress and effectiveness of their local schools, teachers, and school leaders such as superintendents and principals.

Recently, in response to the Wyoming Accountability in Education Act, the Department developed a highly sophisticated and flexible accountability model that can be used to measure the effectiveness of schools in Wyoming. My team and I took this “proof-of-concept” model out to local leaders and community members and gathered feedback. In addition, the Department team continues to fine-tune the State System of Support, a toolbox of advice and support to help schools that, according to the model, are underperforming.

The good news is that the Department accomplished this accountability work without any additional funding from the Legislature and without increasing the size of government. The Department has met every deadline of all the tasks required by the Wyoming Accountability in Education Act. This was complicated work requiring a great deal of expertise, but working together, the Department accomplished every task it was asked to perform and contributed to the work of others.

Every action of the Legislature, as with every action of Congress, has an impact, and can have unintended consequences. In Wyoming, we pride ourselves in limiting the hand of government and believe that what can be done without government control should be done without government control. Belying this value is the practical recognition that government, at great distance from the problem, often with crippling bureaucracies, cannot serve as a surrogate for local leaders and parents, closest to the work, who must act to solve the educational challenges. Initiative, creativity, and hard work are inspired at the ground level by those whose hands are in the work, not cast down from government.

The kind of accountability that will work allows for the freedom to focus on the child, not a compliance-based model that is inherently bureaucratic, demands that teachers and administrators become box-checkers, and requires them to run around assuring others that they are complying. The right kind of accountability sets the measure (expectation), sets the focus on instruction, instructional time, teacher qualifications, teacher training, content standards, and instructional leadership and then gives teachers and administrators the freedom to deliver.

HOW DO WE BECOME A LEADER IN EDUCATION?

If we want to become the best educational system in the Nation, the Legislature must (1) set a measurable goal and not change it for five to seven years, (2) commit to transparency of data and results, and (3) establish a cohesive system of instructional support.

The Legislature has stated that it wants Wyoming to “become a national education leader among states.” I couldn’t agree more. It is not enough to say that you want to become a leader. We must have a measurable goal. A leader in what? Best in reading, in math, in writing, in science, or all four? Measured by what? The ACT? NAEP? Another national assessment? Educators need and await answers to these questions. Educators in Wyoming are saying “tell us what you want us to achieve and let us go do it.” I have no doubt that Wyoming can achieve anything it wishes in educational terms, but the goal and measure must be clearly articulated so that the entire state can come together in this undertaking.

Setting The Measure

I recently recommended to the Select Committee on Accountability that Wyoming must define what it wants to accomplish and then set a measure that

does not change. Massachusetts held to one measure, without changing it, for twenty years. In Wyoming, in 2010, the Management Audit Committee of the Legislature advised the Legislature to “keep the assessment constant.” Yet, here are a few of the testing changes that have been made since the Management Committee’s recommendation:

- Writing is in; writing is out.
- Writing is held at the same time as PAWS; SAWS is a separate administration from PAWS held at a different time.
- Writing is in for grades 3-8; writing is changed to grades 3, 5, 7.
- PAWS writing is out; SAWS is in. ACT writing is in.
- Constructed response is in; constructed response is out.
- MAP is in.
- Compass is in.
- 11th grade PAWS is out; ACT is in.
- WorkKeys is in; WorkKeys is out.
- Body of Evidence is in, Body of Evidence is out.
- ACT suite is in for grades 9, 10, 11.

Consider the perspective of those in the school districts. They want to succeed, but they are waiting for clarity and certainty about the objective and that the measure will not change. They become frustrated when they shoot for achieving results on one measure, only to see that the measure has changed or has been discarded altogether. School districts and teachers must know what the targets are so they can devise the means to reach them, and we must establish a basis of trust that the measure will not change.

Transparency of Data and Results

A common thread in high-performing schools is that data and results are readily available to all. In the most successful schools, data is utilized on a daily basis to inform students’ needs. Data is a driving force in achieving results, and the most meaningful data is the information the teacher collects on a daily basis measuring the progress of students.

Dr. Fullan noted when comparing successful and unsuccessful systems, openness of results is an intrinsic motivator and is far more effective than external or compulsion-based accountability.

Establishing a Cohesive System of Instructional Support

For a cohesive system of support to properly function, each of the bodies having responsibility in education must act in harmony working towards

a clearly articulated goal using an unchanging measure. Each must respect the role and functions of the others. It is appropriate for the Legislature to set the broad goals that we will achieve as a state. For example, the Legislature might establish the goal that Wyoming will have the highest graduation rate in the country in five years. Or, in the span of five years, Wyoming will lead the nation in reading, math, and science scores as measured by NAEP.

Having established the goals, policymakers must understand that the work of educating the child is done locally. As such, a cohesive system of instructional support led by the Department must encompass responsibility of those at all levels in education, starting closest to the student. We must support school boards as they set goals for school districts focused on instruction. School boards must support principals to ensure that instructionally-focused work gets done. Principals must support teachers to make sure that teachers have a laser-like focus on instruction, are using best practices, and have a clear understanding of the progress of each child. As in other states, the Department of Education can and must assist in establishing the collaboration between districts that will bring a focus on best practices in the content areas and on instructional leadership. As a means of beginning a discussion, I provide here a brief overview of important actors in the cohesive system of instructional support.

District Leadership

School boards cannot lose leadership and management responsibility over the education that occurs in their communities. Accountability measures should not seek to micromanage schools from afar or rob school boards and districts of the ability to get the job done. That autonomy comes with a concomitant responsibility to the broader interests of Wyoming as a whole. School boards must commit to a relentless focus on instruction and hold all those in their districts responsible for instruction. As a matter of goal setting, school boards must adopt the targets that presumably will be established by the Legislature and then receive the agenda from each school on how those targets will be met. At each meeting of the school board, school communities should report on the progress towards those goals. As in business, that which gets measured gets done.

As an example of goal-setting at the local level, the January, 2013 issue of the *American School Board Journal* reported on a school board in Montana that set the goal of one hundred percent graduation. With this goal in mind, district educators set about reassessing priorities to achieve their ultimate goal using varied approaches. In the first full year of the program, the drop-out rate fell by 47 percent. They focused on their attendance policies, academic credit

earning policies, and established “on-time graduation committees” in each high school examining at-risk students behaviorally, socially, and academically. Board chair Toni Rehbein said that “it’s about focus, focus, focus . . . Our goals have driven every decision and guided the direction of this school system.”

A 2011 article in the same journal found that the most important decision a school board makes is in the selection of a superintendent. The superintendent must have an understanding of curriculum and instruction and how to improve schools. The school board must take an active management role in holding the superintendent and principals responsible for results and provide support for those efforts.

Building Leadership

As I stated in my January 18, 2011 Comments to the Legislature, the building principal must take the instructional lead. He or she sets the tone for the building and creates a culture of commitment, personal responsibility, and expectation that everyone in the building will take a personal stake in the growth of each and every student. Just as a leader of a business unit is critical to the success of the business organization as a whole, leadership in our schools is equally important.

We must agree as a state, and in each of our communities, that we must have leadership in the buildings committed to instruction. Principals with knowledge and expertise in instructional best practices, curriculum, data, and research-based interventions must be hired. Wyoming students and teachers will be best served by hiring principals who have a background in instruction.

I have proposed the establishment of the “Principal’s Academy” to bring principals together to discuss what instructional leadership looks like in practice. I ask the Legislature to provide funding for this form of district-to-district collaboration advancing instructional leadership throughout the state.

Classroom Leadership

The quality of the classroom teacher is the most significant indicator of student success according to Dr. John Hattie. Other characteristics count in the making of a great school, but ultimately, raising student achievement depends on teachers.

The job of making the magic happen in a classroom, year after year, one class after another, takes the highest level of expertise. The great teachers

bring a deep knowledge of content, effective methodologies, genuine caring and attention to each individual, and a undying belief in the potential of every student.

Mastery in teaching is built by establishing rigorous standards for teachers reflecting not only a mastery of teaching methods, but also mastery of content. If we expect that teachers in Wyoming will perform at the level of teaching mastery, those who do not see teaching as a calling will select another profession. Teacher reviews must be tied to best practices and results. Finally, we must utilize professional development to improve content knowledge, mastery of best practices, and to instill a culture of excellence in the teaching profession.

Based upon the knowledge that professional development has the potential for making the most immediate impact on educational outcomes, the Department has focused on best practices in literacy and numeracy, and has trained thousands of teachers in Wyoming. The response from teachers has been remarkable and these teachers have taken best practices back to their classrooms.

Some school districts are utilizing our instructional support and resources. Other school districts will choose to continue to hire consultants and contractors. Districts want and need instructional leadership, especially in the era of Common Core standards and assessments. Superintendents realize the need to place their focus on instruction. They are ready to accept, without excuses, an agreed upon measure--one that they can trust will not change. All over the state, schools are improving and growing their students.

CONCLUSION

Wyoming educators are ready to do what must be done to ensure that each of our children has the best possible education. Our professional development efforts, held on Friday nights and Saturdays in every part of the state, with the overwhelming response that we have seen, has proven that teachers in Wyoming are motivated not by coercion or mere obligation, but by dedication to, and optimism for, our children.

In some ways, the abundance of money has been a curse in Wyoming. In Wyoming, program after program has been funded, increasing the number of administrators to keep track of the programs, and distracting from the core purpose of education: Instruction. Wyoming has suffered from initiative

fatigue. We do not need more programs. We need a focus on teaching literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking. What should come as a breath of fresh air to taxpayers is not only that Wyoming has the capacity to become a leader in education in the United States, but that we can actually improve education without creating more programs if we have clearly articulated goals, a constant measure, and if all of Wyoming unites in this enterprise.



